

City Building Narrative description and historical walk-through

~ Kevin Phillips, Zoning Administrator
Staff in building since 1977

Structure and design.



The configuration of the building on the lot was dictated by the lot's unusual size and shape, and the original uses of the building. The lot is defined by the intersection of three streets, the right-angle intersection of Neil Street and University Avenue, which run on the predominant north-south street grid, and the angled Chester Street, an older east-west street which runs on the original street grid, which is oriented along the Illinois Central Rail Road track grid, which is 16° east of true North. The resultant lot is a truncated right triangle resting on its long right side along University Avenue to the south, its short side resting along Neil Street to its west, and its hypotenuse along its angled street, Chester Street to its north. The lot is clipped slightly by Market Street at its East end.

This lot was donated to the City by David Bailey, a Charter Founder of the First National Bank of Champaign and later the Champaign National Bank. ¹ He moved out of town in 1877, but he retained family ties and interest in Champaign. It's not unlikely that a part of the reason he donated this lot to the City in 1888 were the difficulties inherent in building on a small triangular lot. He had one requirement, which was that a building worth not less than \$5,000⁰⁰ needed to be built on the site within a year. ² Upon this lot the City built a multi-purpose building housing the Police and Fire Departments, as well as Chambers for City Council Meetings, offices, a library and an auditorium.

That original building fell into serious disrepair (to the extent that the floor beneath the fire apparatus was giving signs of giving way and the tower had been removed) less than forty years later, and the City of Champaign began thinking of ways to replace it.

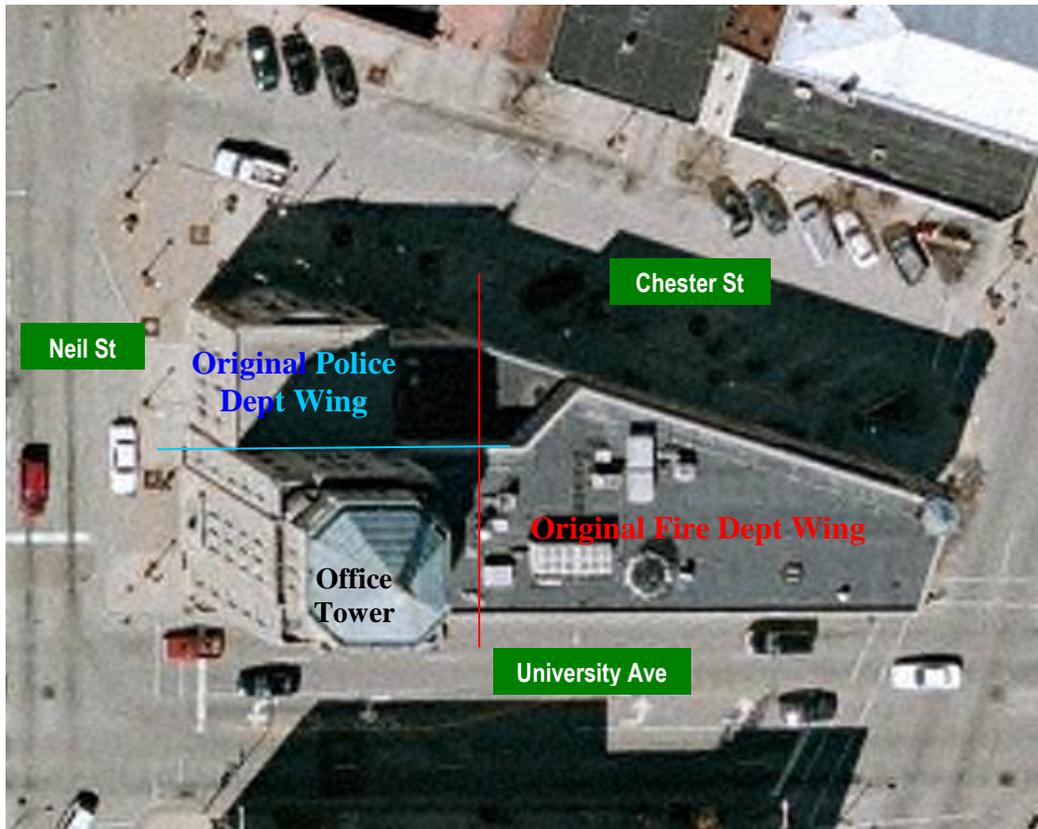
↓ circa 1900 // tower removed, circa 1930 ↘



The Fire Chief noted that "President Roosevelt has seen fit to grant monies to cities and towns for the purpose of erecting public buildings" and urged the Council to take advantage of this offer. After a public viewing, the citizens of Champaign opted by a

vote of 4 to 1 to fund bonds to build a new City Building and the new City Building became Works Progress Administration Project ILL 1357R. ^{3,4}

The new/current City Building was started in 1935 and completed in 1937, and this is the building that is the subject of this summary.



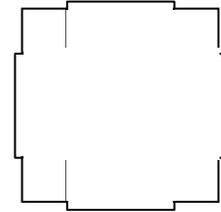
The office tower was situated in the SW, right angled corner, and the extended lot to the east was used for the Fire Department Equipment Bays with living quarters above. The shorter lot extension to the North was used for the Police Department on the first floor, and a second story above the Police Department was added in the original design, matching the two story Fire Department wing.

Approaching the City Building from the west, the appearance of the building is virtually unchanged from its appearance at its opening in 1937. The building is constructed primarily of sand-colored brick (mortared with matching-color mortar) with extensive limestone accents, and while there is a difference in the color of the materials it is very slight and the overall effect is of a building of one color.

The bulk of the tower section of the building rises in a 5-story block, which includes all of the main floors served by the original elevator. The 5-story block is topped with a smaller 6th story, set back from the perimeter of the 5th floor, and this floor has its corners chamfered to be an irregular octagon in shape. The 6th floor is then capped with a copper pyramid of the same irregular octagonal shape, which is itself capped with a short spire.

Above the second floor the brick and stone work cladding the tower structure is designed to emphasize its vertical lines. The tower section itself is not a simple square, the corner offices are slightly indented from the main face wall of the tower.

The visual effect of these offsets is to create more vertical lines running up the sides of the building.



The center section of the tower is defined by sets of three vertically oriented windows on each floor, and matching windows on each office corner. The sets of three center windows are separated by unbroken vertical columns of brick, also emphasizing the vertical lines of the building. The windows are configured as shown below, two vertical rectangles above a horizontal rectangle, which also emphasizes verticality. The original windows were replaced when the building underwent major repurposing in 1988, but the appearance of the windows was kept exactly the same. One improvement in the appearance, which more closely resembles conditions in 1937, was the removal of all window air conditioning units when central air conditioning was installed as a part of the 1988 remodeling project. On the sides of the triple window sets runs a wide vertical brick column. Between each window set running vertically between each floor are three small stacked squares made up of brickwork.

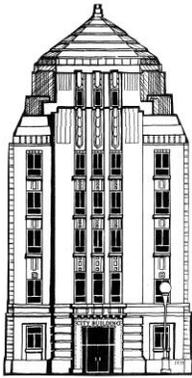


The top of the 5th floor is capped with a parapet wall, the outside top of which has assorted art deco geometric designs, and on the corners it is setback in three stair step layers. The 6th floor as mentioned before is inset, and has had the corners chamfered.



In the center sections of the 6th floor are single fixed windows, narrower than the individual windows on lower floors and taller than the triple window sets. There is a narrow walkway which would permit maintenance to carefully maneuver around the top of the building attending to the floodlights which light up the crown of the building at night. The copper pyramid roof cap emphasizes the appearance of height.

The effect of all of these elements taken together is to make the Champaign City building appear to rise even further skyward than its six-story height, which was in 1935 a very significant height for a building in Champaign. This is in keeping with a WPA project designed to both help fill a real need in the community *and* serve as an uplifting example of hope for the future.



Returning one's gaze to the lower levels, the first floor is treated somewhat differently than those above. This is partly purely functional, as the Fire and Police Departments needed several vehicle bay doors, but it reflects the common commercial different treatment of first floors on other buildings in the downtown.

On the western original main entrance liberal use was made of limestone accents around the entrance door, including a door mantle with the simple inscription "CITY BUILDING". Flanking the door are large limestone panels which, unlike other major elements of the building, are split horizontally, as if to suggest a flow into and out of the portal. Up close, the doorway is framed with dentals and a narrow band of art deco triangular trim. Diamond deco details frame a lamp hanging from the roof of the entryway, under a non-functional balcony which forms a canopy over the entrance. A duplicate of this non-functional balcony hangs over the center three windows on the South elevation of the tower.

On the first and second floors the building extends north of the tower. From the outside this looks like a separate element, although it was an original part of the building and from the inside of the building it does not appear to be different from the tower. This allows the tower to maintain its vertical presence. The second floor is separated from the first by a narrow limestone belt course, and the windows are treated differently than those in the tower. The first floor windows of the north wing, which originally looked into the Police Department, are the same tall, narrow windows used on the sixth floor. Six windows are presented in wider groups of two. The windows used on the second floor are the same ones used in the tower, but their placement in the wall and surrounding brickwork differ, and they are placed evenly over the first floor pairs of windows, probably used in the Police wing for security. The top of the second floor of the north wing is ringed by a scalloped belt course of limestone, topped by a short parapet of bricks, and capped by a plain limestone belt course. The foundation of the entire building is a wide limestone band.



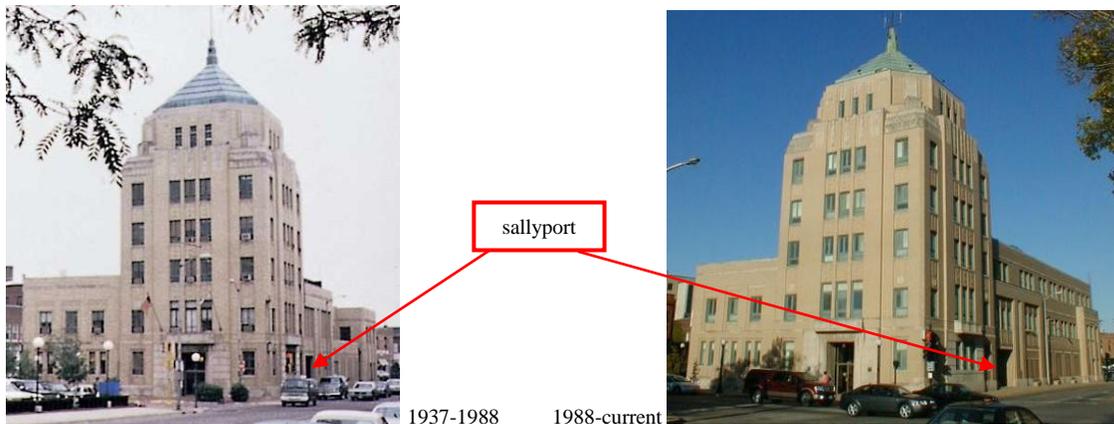
The southern elevation of the building is the most changed over time, but this was mandated by the repurposing of the east wing of the building. Along University Avenue there were originally a series of six garage doors, four for the Fire Department and two for Police Department use. The Fire Department left the building for a new facility in 1966, and at that time the Police Department relocated from their offices in the first floor and basement of the tower section to the former quarters of the Fire Department in the east two story wing of the building. The Fire Department bay area was remodeled into offices for the Patrol and Records Divisions, the former living quarters for the Fire Department became offices for Investigations and the Chief. Part of the Fire Department's truck bay area was converted to be a new City Jail, which replaced the old jail area in the basement of the tower. For security reasons the truck bays were bricked up and small window areas were left in the bricked bays. These windows were removed and bricked in following a 1970 incident when a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the Police Station by a wheelchair bound protester and one policeman was seriously burned following anti-war riots during the Vietnam era.

The basic design and form of the east wing of the building reflects the design of the first two floors of the tower section. The base of the building is a thick limestone band. The bulk is buff-colored brickwork, with matching colored mortar. The limestone course which separates the floors in the tower section is not duplicated, but it is reflected in limestone dental work over each of the truck bay portals, and that remains although the doors have been bricked in. A limestone band runs around the top of the second and the added third floor. The same windows used in the tower, a triple set of two vertical rectangles over a horizontal rectangle are used. Decorative brickwork squares are placed

between the windows on the second floor and the truck bay portals (now bricked in) on the first floor. These elements emphasize the horizontal character of the east wing, and contrast it with the verticality of the tower section.

During the interim period, the Police Department continued to use one drive through sallyport as a back entrance to the City Jail. The exterior of the second floor was unchanged during this period.

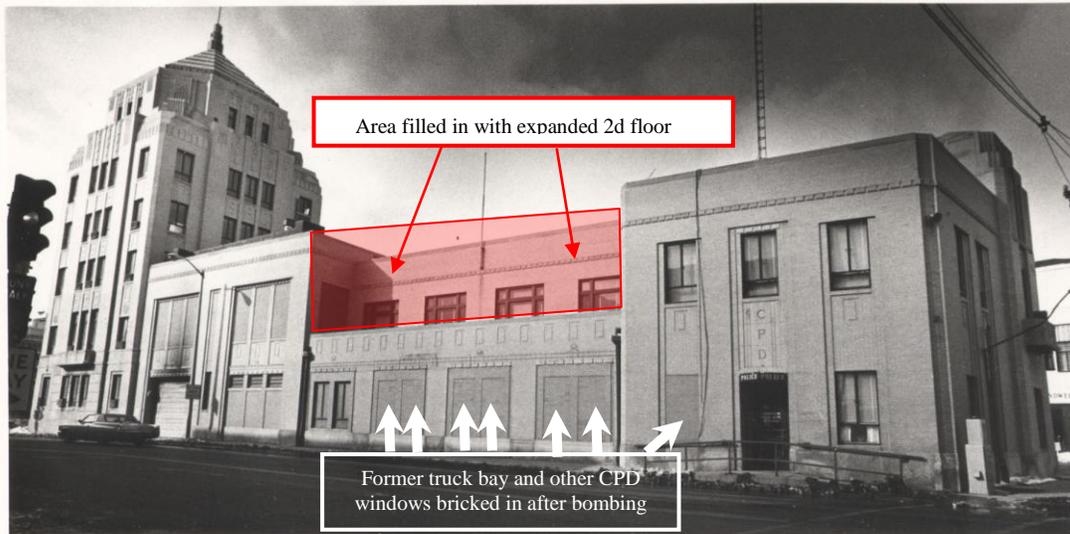
When the Police Department relocated to a new headquarters and the building was remodeled into its current configuration, the southern bricked-in fire truck doors were left untouched, but the police sallyport exit on University was converted into a recessed picture window, retaining the appearance of a bay door opening to passing traffic while providing light to the new atrium area.



During the 1988 remodeling the south wall of the east wing's second floor was pulled forward to match the line of the first floor, and a third floor was added to the east wing. This maximizes the efficiency of the use of the City Building's small triangular lot. The design of the third floor addition reflects the design elements of the remainder of the east wing.



The third floor is slightly set back from the second floor, and replicates the elements of a horizontal dental limestone band above the windows, and a plain limestone band around the top edge. The same windows are used on both the 2nd and 3rd floors on the southern elevation.



The former south entrance to the Fire and then Police Departments is no longer a public access door, it is an emergency exit only, but it retains a doorway appearance. The solid brick southern wall serves a purpose for the current use of the space directly behind it, the City Council Chambers. This wall helps to soundproof the Chambers, which functions as a meeting room and television studio for the meetings in the Chambers, from the noise generated by the very busy traffic on the arterial University Avenue.

The North side is the second most changed elevation of the building, also because of the closing of the entrance doors to the truck bays. In the same fashion as the south elevation, the overall appearance of the north face has remained remarkably constant, in spite of the repurposing of the east wing.

Again, the third floor is slightly set back from the second floor, and replicates the elements of a horizontal dental limestone band above the windows, and a plain limestone band around the top edge. The same windows are used on both the 2nd and 3rd floors on the northern elevation as well, although sometimes the single larger vertical window is used. The hose tower, which had risen above the second floor, was capped with a top designed to raise it above the third floor addition to retain its basic appearance. There were fewer large bay doors to close on the north elevation, although all but one were bricked in. The old police sallyport door was converted into the main lobby



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entrance to the building, and the sallyport itself is the first floor of a large atrium area which welcomes visitors to the City Building.

Now begins the description of the interior of the building, beginning with the east wing which has been completely repurposed from its original use as the home of both the Fire and then Police Departments. The former Police sallyport north entrance has been converted to the main entrance to the City Building. The south exit from the sallyport has been glassed in, and the resulting lobby atrium area is a very modern, light-filled space.

Old North sallyport entrance
Current main entrance



Interior view of lobby
Former sallyport exit in rear



Former exit of police sallyport
Currently glassed in window, set back from street view of lobby from above



This area was simply a drive through garage in the original configuration of the building. Originally a door on the interior west side of the sallyport lead to the Police offices and a ramp to the basement which housed the original jail. When the Police department replaced the Fire Department in the east wing of building, a door on the east side of the sallyport lead to the jail area, which was relocated to the first floor, in space converted

from fire truck parking bays. The jail area was the same space now occupied by the reception desk.

Now entering the new main entrance, the space is the open lobby/reception atrium, with the reception desk on the left. Proceeding to the left past the reception desk one will enter the Council Chambers, which takes up the bulk of the former fire truck parking bays. Although the interior space bears no resemblance to the period when it was used either as fire truck bays or as the police patrol and records area, the unusual trapezoid shape of the space works well as a large public meeting room. Moving the Council Chambers to the first floor from its former locations (originally 5th floor 1937-1966, then 2nd floor 1966-1988) means that this large meeting space can be cleared more quickly in the event of an emergency.

The Council Chambers is entered from its northwest corner, and the dais for the Council and other commissions is located all the way to the right along the south wall of the room. The bricked in fire truck bays are covered by standard wallboards, but behind the center of the dais is the wood panel that has been behind the Council since the building was built in 1937. The Council commissioned a large metal version of the City Seal at some point which has resided behind the Council ever since.

entrance



looking south at dais



Council Chambers in 2nd floor auditorium with same wood panel & seal



Same wood trim seen in original
1937 location of Council Chambers on 5th floor



Current 5th floor configured as
Legal Dept offices



The far eastern corner of the first floor is a small private meeting room, two utility rooms, and a staircase. These areas really bear no historical significance, having been small rooms used for various purposes in different configurations over time.

There exists no information to describe the interior appearance of the first floor of the west wing of the building in detail when it was used as fire truck bays. This is likely because this area was very utilitarian and sparsely decorated when used for this purpose.

In 1966, after the Fire Department left the City Building for a new headquarters building, the former Fire Department space was remodeled as the new home of the Police Department. The Police sallyport was basically unchanged from its original use, except that as mentioned before it then exited in the opposite direction to the new jail facilities.

Before proceeding to describe the physical plant of the jail, it would be useful to briefly describe its use. The Champaign Police Department has never operated a long-term jail facility. The Police Department jail facilities have only ever served as short-term lockup facilities. Any person convicted by a Judge and sentenced to serve any time has always been housed at the County Jail in Urbana, operated by the County Sheriff. City of Champaign jail facilities have been used only to book and process prisoners following arrest until such time as they can be promptly arraigned at the County Courthouse. If they are to be detained prior to trial but after arraignment, that is done at the County Jail as well. This meant that persons held in the City of Champaign Police lockup had not yet been convicted of any offense for which they were being held.

Prior to 1966, Champaign's Police lockup was in the basement of the tower section of the City Building. By 1966, state and federal agencies who reviewed local detention facilities were becoming concerned about subterranean detention operations. In the event of a fire,

prisoners detained in basement jails often perished, and local governments were being encouraged to close basement jails and relocate them above ground. The timing of the Fire and Police Departments' moves permitted Champaign to relocate its jail to conform to newer standards. The new facilities were considerably more spacious, and also permitted better separation of youthful offenders from adults.

Entering the jail from the sallyport, police officers entered the booking area directly. To the left was the women's cellblock; to the right was the men's area. Each of these areas were large concrete block rooms divided by a series of cells. There was room inside the separate rooms for an officer to enter and interact with the prisoners on the other side of the bars. Past the cell blocks for men and women was the booking area, with interview tables and a fingerprint station. To the right of the booking area, against the south wall were two individual cells usually reserved for juvenile prisoners. A small room in the north area of the jail portion of the Police Department served as the Police darkroom for photo processing.

Proceeding east beyond the jail section of the east wing of the first floor, one entered the patrol squad area. This area was structurally unchanged from its time as a Fire Truck Parking Bay, the interior of the exterior walls were all clad in glossy beige ceramic tile. There was a short wall separating the hallway from three shift command desks, south of this shift command area was a taller wall which separated the records area from the rest of the Police Department. Records was one large room filled with desks in an open plan, corner cubicles were reserved for the Lieutenant who supervised all civilian employees and the Head Clerk.

East of the Records area was the Lobby, and jutting into the Lobby from the records area (and accessible only through the Records Area) were the Radio Dispatch room and the Front Desk. The public entered the Police Department from the South Door on University Avenue into the Lobby.

The easternmost end of the first floor had a small room which served as a locker room for female employees, an office for the Police Social Worker, and the stairwell.

At the bottom of the stairwell when the east wing was the police department was a utility room (still there) but the main pathway lead into the briefing room. The southern end of the briefing room held the department's radio equipment, and when the interagency dispatch computer system was installed it was housed there as well.

West of the Briefing room one passed through a thick concrete wall into the firing range. The basement was a good place for this use from a soundproofing point of view, but a large machine was required to process the smoke and dust caused by pistol practice. South of the firing range in the basement was the Evidence storage area. West of the firing range was the men's locker room. South of the men's locker room were the boilers which heated the building. Beyond that one enters the tower section, which shall be discussed later.

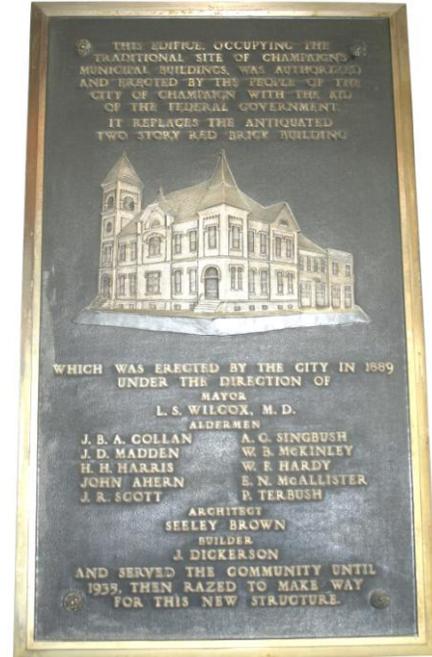
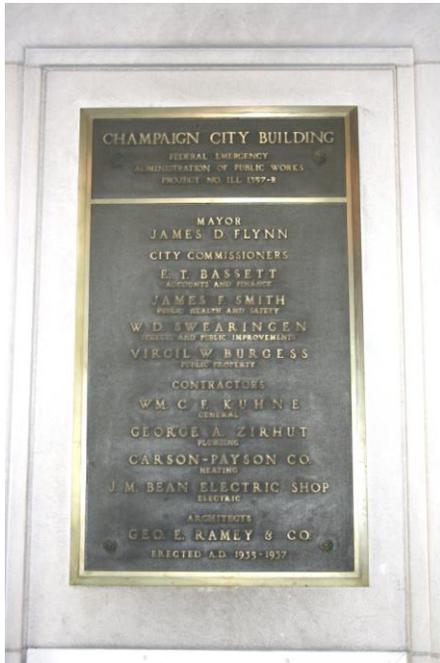
Returning to the lobby and proceeding up the staircase to the second floor one entered the Investigations Section. At the top of the stairs was a small break room to the right, to the left visitors would be greeted by the Investigations Secretary. Beyond the Secretary were the Detectives' squad rooms, created from the former living quarters for the Fire Department. The Patrol Captain, Investigations Captain, and the Investigations Command had their own offices; Detectives shared two large open plan offices. At the end of the hallway was the office of the Chief of Police, whose office was accessed only through his Secretary's office.

Beyond the Investigations section on the second floor one left the Police Department and entered the Council Chambers, which was a large windowless room originally designated in plans as "auditorium". Beyond the Council Chambers one entered the Tower Section of the Building.

To discuss the Tower section, it is best to begin back outside of the building, at the old main entrance on Neil Street, the west façade of the building. The west façade is the most unchanged; the only difference is that the windows and doors are not original. The current windows and doors duplicate precisely the look and function of the originals, except that they are modern insulated dual pane windows with integrated screens and blinds. From the street they present the same appearance as the originals.



Entering the foyer, above the aluminum & glass entrance doors the original lantern fixture hangs in the limestone archway. The portal is topped with dental carving, geometric designs, and the inscription **CITY BUILDING**. Going through the threshold, the foyer area has limestone walls on both sides, carved with gently rounded vertical rib-sections. Each side has an inset for a radiator, covered by a grill. Above that, each side has a large brass plaque centered on the center panel. The plaque on the right (south) side has a relief of the original City Building that stood on this same site from 1899 until its removal in 1935 for the construction of the current building. It also contains the names of the Council members at that time, and the architect. The plaque on the left (north) side labels the current building as Federal Emergency Public Works Project 1357R, and lists the Councilmen, architect, and contractors.



Both brass plaques are in identical “frame” insets, the frame on the right was omitted to permit the relief of the first City Building to be better seen.

A short flight of two stairs leads to a small landing and the interior doors, also aluminum & glass.

Once through the entrance doors, the tower lobby is configured much the same as it was originally. Slightly to the left is the elevator. On the right of the elevator is a short hallway which leads forward into the new lobby and to the left, behind the elevator, to a staircase to the basement. The lobby floor is terrazzo, finished in a diamond geometric pattern in shades of gray. The lobby walls have a low black marble wainscoting. Above the wainscot, the walls are a simple plaster. The ceiling is a shallow stepped design with three levels around the perimeter. On the north and south of the elevator are two



archways. The archway to the north leads to the staircase to upper floors; this staircase is in a terrazzo to match the lobby. The archway to the south leads to a short hallway which leads to the new main lobby, on the left side of this hallway, behind the elevator shaft, are stairs leading to the basement. The archways are square with chamfered corners, the interior of which is decorated with inverse fluting.



Old Lobby with grey terrazzo
(the colors match better than the pictures would indicate, the newer areas have more natural light)



New lobby with grey terrazzo



Old hallway w/ grey terrazzo



New stair landing with grey terrazzo

On the south, or right side of the lobby is a set of offices. This group of offices is similar in function from the lobby as the original offices, although the open plan offices were replaced by cubicles, and then later separated by non-bearing walls. The use of this office suite has varied over time; currently it is the home to the Community Relations Division of the City Manager's Office.

On the north, or left side of the lobby as one enters from the old main entrance, is a second, larger set of offices. Currently the home of the Neighborhood Services Department, this area originally housed the Police Department. The basic layout of this suite of offices is similar to the original design, a large room filled with desks with some offices around the perimeter of the room. That being said, no original furniture remains. In the right rear are two offices. If one makes a sharp left turn and then another left turn, the original Police Chief's office is intact, complete with its own small restroom. This is now the office of the Director of Neighborhood services.

If one returns to the lobby and proceeds upstairs, a series of fire block doors have been installed. Originally the staircase was open from the first to fifth floors, but because current fire codes prohibit that openness to prevent fires from proceeding between floors, each floor has been secured by a fire door. The original layouts of the offices have all been reconfigured, but the use is the same, the remainder of the building is an office tower. Originally the 6th floor was just unfinished space, that area is now offices as well

as the Legal Department's Library. The 5th floor, which originally housed the Council Chambers, is now the Legal Department, and much of the decorative woodwork from the old chambers was retained and reused.

There have been some significant changes to Champaign's locally cherished City Building in its 75 year life span. In spite of its significant adaptations and alterations over the years to maintain usability, the essence of this beautiful WPA Deco building remains a local treasure. Relocating the Fire Department and Police Departments elsewhere required repurposing those spaces completely. There is no non-major way to reuse fire truck parking bays, firefighter living quarters, jail cells, and police booking rooms without making major changes.



Replacement casement windows
(Original radiators)

Making the Council Chambers larger for the larger city Champaign has become, and making them accessible to all and more exit-able in the event of emergency also meant significant changes. It was necessary to close off the grand stairwell which, while beautiful, would have permitted a fire to sweep from basement to the 6th floor without slowing down. Upgrades have been made to heating and air conditioning which has helped rid the building of ugly, noisy window air conditioners. Original casement windows were replaced with new casement windows which duplicated them entirely, albeit with double glazing. The new lobby, which passes by a security desk (rather than visitors needing to be taken upstairs by Emma in the old manual elevator), has grey terrazzo floors, reminiscent of the old grey terrazzo lobby floors which remain in the tower.

In 2009 the City Council authorized an extensive tuck pointing and brickwork repair project when it was discovered that several of the original lintels were acting as conduits for water to enter the walls. This project was overseen by the Historic Preservation Commission in order to ensure that the repairs were in keeping with the original character of the building and to ensure that Champaign's locally iconic City Building would last to serve its citizens for decades to come.

We truly believe that Champaign City Building to be worthy of adding to the list of places on the National Register of Historic Places.



Footnotes:

- 1: [A Standard History of Champaign County Illinois](http://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/oca/Books2007-09/standardhistoryov/standardhistoryov1stew/standardhistoryov1stew.pdf), J.R. Stewart, Editor
The Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago and New York, 1918
<http://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/oca/Books2007-09/standardhistoryov/standardhistoryov1stew/standardhistoryov1stew.pdf>
- 2: Original Quit Claim Deed donating the lot to the City of Champaign, framed and displayed in the City Building.
- 3: Champaign Urbana Courier, October 1935, Copies of articles on file in the Urbana Free Library Historical Archives filed by building address. Exact dates obscured.
4. Brass dedication plaque, located in west foyer.

The uses of the spaces within the building are taken either from the original blueprints which are attached to the application or the personal memory of the author of this report.